

Bye, Bye Miss American Pie: How Music Shapes Collective Memory

Nicole Feudi

*Communication Design
Elon University*

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements in
an undergraduate senior capstone course in communications

Abstract

The music industry has changed monumentally through online music streaming services such as Spotify. These sites have allowed any person to access almost any song that has ever existed, thus making music more popular than ever. People listen to music for many different reasons, though most of those reasons are to benefit listeners in some positive way. At times, music is created during a time of struggle, such the 1960s and 1970s. While music fans sometimes remember the period as happy and youthful, that is not necessarily the case. This study examines how music has an effect on collective memory of the 1960s and 1970s. While we cannot neglect the issues that existed in the past, music allows the world to cope with them.

I. Introduction

While the music of the 1960s and 1970s may have attempted to get people to think of peace and youth, was this time actually reflective of these characteristics? Maybe not. Music instills a magical feeling that allows people to remember the past as something different than what it actually was. Members of society do this through collective memory, reinventing the past using present needs. By doing such, the past becomes malleable. Since music is a highly influential form of media, it can impact people's thoughts and make them think in a particular way. This research paper attempts to discover more about how music affects collective memory. In an age where technology has increased accessibility to media content, such as music, it's important to understand the effect this has on society. Music streaming services allow people to access whatever songs they want at any time, thus monumentally changing this industry. This study explores the implications of that change across multi-generational perspectives.

II. Literature Review

This study draws on previous research in several areas, including the role of streaming for discovering music, possible effect of music on creating mood and nostalgia, theories surrounding social identity, and the concept of collective memory.

Keywords: Collective Memory, Social Identity, Nostalgia, Music, Music Streaming
Email: nfeudi@elon.edu

Spotify and Music Discovery

In the social media age, music streaming has increased access to music. Spotify, a streaming service established in 2006 by Daniel Ek, is a prime example. In 2018, Spotify reported that it has 60 million subscribers, which is the highest of all music streaming services by far. Its closest competitor is Apple Music with 27 million subscribers. In only two years, Spotify's revenue has jumped from \$1.8 billion to \$3.8 billion. Many use Spotify as a way of discovering new music through the many playlists provided that are updated daily (Knopper, 2017). Spotify also helps users discover new music through its related artists and songs feature, which points users in the direction of related content depending on what they're listening to. It also encourages social sharing so that users can look at what they're friends are listening to, therefore becoming a social network (Ford, 2015).

The Internet and social media have made producing and consuming music much easier for the general population. They have allowed artists to engage in self-promotion and consumers to enjoy their products due to the high accessibility the Internet has provided (Verboord & Noord, 2016). This feature of easy access has instilled in users the desire to continually explore and discover new content, including music. Consumers are innately curious and are therefore willing to spend money on music streaming services to satisfy their curiosity (Nowak, 2016).

Construction of Social Identity

Social identity theory says that people place themselves in certain social groups to help strengthen their self-esteem. Many people, especially young people, use music to define their social identity. Therefore, there is a possible relationship between music preference and social identity/self-esteem (Shepherd & Sigg, 2015). Another study found that participants talked about music with one another more than any other topic, and they were able to use this information to make fairly accurate guesses about the other person's personality (Carlson, Saari, Burger, & Toiviainen, 2017). Music genres have been associated with different personality traits using a five-factor model: Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism. For example, Openness can be correlated to Reflective and Complex genres, which include classical, jazz, blues, and folk. If a person has a preference for these genres, it is probable that they have a high tendency to be open to new ideas (Rentfrow & Gosling, 2003).

Mood Management and Nostalgia

Another reason people listen to music is to change their mood. Listening to music has been found to be a successful method in changing a bad mood, increasing energy, and reducing stress and tension. This relates to the mood management theory, which says that people aim to avoid bad moods and achieve good moods to attain a peaceful and happy state of mind. People are naturally motivated to get rid of a bad mood if they are in one, and will therefore seek out activities that can potentially help with this (Lei Chen, Shuhua Zhou, & Bryant, 2007). Music also encourages people to move and participate in physical activity, which can lead to loss of weight, decreased blood pressure, improved blood sugar and cardiovascular risk factor, and an overall improved quality of life (Murrock & Higgins, 2009).

Nostalgia is associated with personal experience and memories that is commonly evoked by music (Barrett & Janata, 2016). More broadly, nostalgia is considered a specific form of passion, which refers to the emotions a person feels toward a certain object, memory, or experience. Many people develop a passion for the technologies and content of their youth or childhood, often leaving them with a nostalgic feeling. Passion can be brought into existence by many things including, old technologies, childhood memories, and the limits of shared intergenerational experiences. People become more passionate about something when they realize their experiences cannot be shared with younger generations. Through this realization though, members of society are able to discuss and retell these experiences, perhaps inspiring other generations.

Nostalgia Through Rock N' Roll Music

Rock n' roll is a genre of music stemming from the 1950s. At first, many music listeners were hesitant to jump on board due to its scandalous and shocking nature for that time. By the beginning of the 1970s, it had become a way of life. Those who were a part of that culture now had an outlet for their self-expression and were excited to use music to share their experiences with the rest of the world (Dobrotvorskaja, 1992). The nostalgia that rock n' roll created is the reason it will likely remain one of the most popular genres of

music. It will continue to be passed on through generations of younger people, as will the desire to listen to it (Selbin, 1990). It will continue to be used as gifts for significant events such as birthdays and anniversaries, and it will continue to be used to simply pass the time. Rock n' roll's versatility and timelessness are two reasons it provides such a substantial musical nostalgia to many who experience it (Kotarha, 2002).

Controversial Issues of the 1960s/70s

While the '60s and '70s were musically important, numerous social issues made the period a difficult one. African Americans were restricted by many laws (Ware, 2013). Similarly, women had limited rights during this time, struggling for control over their own bodies and equality in the workplace. Domestic violence was not taken seriously, resulting in a significantly large amount of domestic abuse victims (Spain, 2011). The Vietnam War, the Cold War, the Civil Rights Movement, and human rights were all movements of this era that caused great struggle for many, though many still look back at those years as a time of peace and youth due to the music that came from it (Twombly & McDonald, 2018).

The Effect of Music on Collective Memory

Collective memory is a theory that states the past is not preserved, but reinvented in the minds of society using the needs and information of the present. Our collective memory uses social frameworks as tools to reconstruct images of the past. Therefore, the past becomes malleable and flexible, and it becomes evident through the media of the present (Cai, 2016). Collective memory attempts to explain why people act the way they do and is represented in the content of media, music being one of many. Events such as the Vietnam War are remembered in different ways by different people. These different thoughts and memories can be combined to create a popular memory, though this still may not be very realistic. Musicians of that time wrote songs in protest of the Vietnam War and in favor of peace. This framed the war in a certain way that encouraged people to remember it differently (Eyerman, Madigan, & Ring, 2017). Music influences the way the world remembers many events, especially traumatic events. People have the ability to actively forget forms of trauma, meaning that while they cannot completely erase the memories, they can turn them into a heuristic resource so they can continue to prosper (Aydin, 2017).

In order to examine how music affects collective memory, this study used a survey and focus group to examine this topic through different generational perspectives.

III. Methods

The study used two research methods. The first method was an online survey including both multiple-choice and open-ended questions intended to reveal how people think about the 1960s and '70s. Facebook was used to distribute the survey to millennial college students, young adults, as well as baby boomers. The survey generated 78 responses, with the two biggest age groups 18-24 (34 responses) and 55-64 (32 responses). For this reason, the study focuses on these two generations.

In addition to gender and age, the survey asked questions including:

- What are a few words you associate with the 1960s/1970s?
 - Can you list any monumental events that happened during this time?
 - How often do you listen to music of this era?
 - If you listen to this music, why do you choose to listen to this over other genres?
 - What are some of your favorite songs/artists from that era?
 - What, if anything, does this music make you nostalgic for/about?
 - Through what means do you think old classic rock songs get revived the most in our generation today?
-

Survey Results

When asked to associate words with the 1960s/70s, those in the 18-24 age group were most likely to say “hippies” (16 responses), followed by “drugs” (8 responses), then “music,” “Woodstock,” “groovy,” “civil rights” and “disco” (6 responses each). Among those aged 55-64, “rock n’ roll” had 8 responses, followed by “fun” and “music/The Beatles” (6 responses each), then “groovy” and “hippies” (5 responses each).

When listing events of the period, those in the age group 18-24 most often listed “Vietnam War” (15 responses), “civil rights” (12), “Kennedy assassinations” (11), “Woodstock” (8), and “Martin Luther King Jr. assassination” (7). The top responses from the age group 55-64 were: “Kennedy assassinations” (21 responses), “Martin Luther King Jr. assassination” (17), “Vietnam War” (15), and “moon landing” (9).

Not surprisingly, the older age group listens to this music much more frequently than the younger age group does. The majority of the 55-64 group listens to this music either every day or a few times a week, while 60 percent of the younger age group listens to this music once a month or less. In addition, nearly half of the older group reported “brings you back to a happy place” as the primary reason for listening to music of the period, compared to only 12 percent of the youngest listeners, who were much more likely to cite “puts you in a good mood” (32 percent), or “just simply enjoy the tune” (35 percent).

In terms of favorite artists, “The Beatles” was overwhelmingly the most mentioned by both the youngest group (16 responses) and the oldest (11). Among the youngest respondents, “I don’t know/no answer” (8) was the second-most offered response, followed by “Jackson 5” (4). Among older respondents, “Elton John,” “The Eagles,” “The Who,” “The Rolling Stones,” and “Joni Mitchell” each received 4 responses.

The two age groups also differed in terms of nostalgia and perceptions of how rock songs get revived in today’s culture. The 18-24 age group overwhelmingly felt the period’s music made them nostalgic for parents and family (50 percent), in contrast to the 55-64 age group, who more often indicated the music made them nostalgic for their childhood or the feeling of youth (63 percent). Interestingly, half of the 55-64 group said music streaming services were the primary means for reviving classic rock songs, while an additional 31 percent said it was passed down through generations. Among the 18-24 group, half of the respondents said classic rock music was primarily passed down through generations, with other responses distributed across film, social media, and streaming music services.

Focus group

A focus group was also conducted in complement to the online survey. The focus group included two people in the 18-24 age group, and two people in the 55-64 age group. Each person was asked to record how they were feeling emotionally that day. After they recorded these answers, they were asked to listen to four songs identified by Spotify as the top two classic rock songs for each decade: “All Along the Watchtower” by Jimi Hendrix, “All Day and All of the Night” by The Kinks, “Across the Universe” by the Beatles, and “American Pie” by Don McLean. As the songs played, they were asked to write down any words that came to mind when listening to the songs. After listening to the songs, they were asked to write down the emotions they felt after listening to the songs. They were then asked if the songs gave them a sense of nostalgia, if they make them want to go back and live in that time, and if they are aware of the many struggles this era had or if they simply think of the music of that time instead.

The two respondents in the 18-24 age group differed only slightly in their answers. Respondent 1, a 22-year-old female, said she was feeling a little flustered, but overall pretty happy. Some words that came to mind when she listened to the songs were “oldies,” “parents,” “dancing,” “good beat,” “happy,” “togetherness,” “motivation,” “exciting,” and “summer.” After listening to the songs she described her emotions as “upbeat,” “good mood,” “at ease,” “happy,” “soothed” and “wanting to dance.” When asked if these songs gave her a sense of nostalgia, she said the songs reminded her of car rides with her family. “American Pie” especially took her back to the summer after graduating high school and the graduation parties and good times she spent with her friends. She also said these songs definitely make her want to go back and live in that time, as she believes it would be a happy place. Finally, when asked if she was aware of the struggles that took place during that time, she responded with “Yes, but the music doesn’t reflect that. I would never associate the music with those times since the music brings so much happiness.”

Respondent 2, a 19-year-old female, described herself as very stressed out at the beginning of the session. While listening to the songs, a few words she wrote down were “boogie,” “70s,” “peaceful,” “lively,” “joyful,” “upbeat,” “happy,” and “light.” She admitted that after listening to the songs she felt much more

upbeat and excited, while also peaceful and relaxed. When asked if this music gave her a sense of nostalgia, she said that although she was not alive during this time, she longs for a time when music still expressed emotions of love and peace, just as these songs do, rather than what she termed “vulgar” emotions music expresses today. While she would like to go back to a time where music was much more meaningful, she is still aware of the racial and political issues that existed. She believes that because people were so invested in the music during those times, it was their only way to detach themselves from those issues.

The two respondents included in the 55-64 age group had much different answers, which was expected, as they lived through this time period. Respondent 3, a 57-year-old female, admitted to being incredibly overwhelmed and anxious. To describe the songs, she used words such as “rebellion,” “anti-government,” “love,” “dancing,” “carefree,” “confidence,” “contentment,” “happy,” “contagious,” and “high school fun.” Each song gave her a different feeling. She went from feeling angst during “All Along the Watchtower,” to youthful and hopeful during “All Day and All of the Night,” to pure happiness during “Across the Universe” and “American Pie.” When asked if the songs gave her a sense of nostalgia, she responded that while she usually listened to different bands and songs, the tune and emotions of the songs definitely brought her back to her youth. She also admitted that while it is tempting to be young again, her life now is just what she wants and she wouldn’t want to go back and live in a different time. For the last question, she answered with, “While I am very aware of the unrest in the youth over government, Vietnam, segregation, etc., I think a lot of the music reflects the unrest and the quest for love and peace.”

The final respondent for the focus group was a 58-year-old male who described himself as incredibly tired. A few words he used to describe the songs were “high school,” “best guitar player” (referring to Jimi Hendrix), “unbelievable,” “freedom,” “talent,” and “unique.” After listening to these songs, he felt at ease, as some of these songs are from his favorite albums that he enjoyed listening to as a child and still enjoys to this day. When asked if these songs gave him a sense of nostalgia, he replied, “of course.” They brought him back to his youth and his high school days. More specifically, “American Pie” reminded him of his Boy Scout camping trip, and he began to feel an overwhelming sense of nostalgia. His answer to the next question was almost identical to that of the 57-year-old female, as he admitted he would not want to go back and live in that time as he likes his present life too much. Again, his answer to the last question was similar to that of the female, stating that there were many struggles, but music was inspired by the current events of that era.

IV. Findings

A review of the survey and focus group data reveals interesting connections. It seems that the 18-24 age group used words related to peace and music to describe the ‘60s/’70s. With words like “Woodstock,” “groovy,” and “disco,” it’s evident that music is the first thing that comes to mind for them. While the 55-64 age group used music-related words, they also used many words that described their experience and what it was like to grow up in that time. For example, two of the most frequently used words were “flower power” and “bell bottoms,” which reflect that time era. This age group also used the word “fun” to describe those years. Both age groups listed the Vietnam War, the Kennedy assassinations, and the Martin Luther King Jr. assassination as important events. It seems as though while people are aware of these events, they choose to remember the more positive things that came of that time, such as the music.

Results also seem to validate the theory of collective memory, at least for the older age group. The most frequent answer for that age group when asked why they listen to this genre of music, was that it brings them back to a happy place. The most frequent answer for the younger age group was they simply enjoy the tune. The second most popular answer for both age groups was that this music puts them in a good mood or relieves stress, suggesting also that the mood management theory is valid.

The last question asked how this music is revived in today’s world. The younger group said it is most revived by being passed down through generations, which was expected. The way most young people listen to or even know about old music is through their parents, so it makes sense that this would be their answer. However, the older group chose a different answer. Most agreed that this music is most readily available through music streaming services, such as Spotify, bearing out that streaming music services have revived old music and allowed people to hear it on demand.

The focus group provided further insights that the survey could not. The two younger respondents

both described the music with happy and joyful words, saying that the songs made them want to dance. They both came into the focus group a bit stressed out and left feeling excited and positive, supporting the mood management theory. Though the feeling of nostalgia was minimal, it still existed for them as the songs brought them back to particular summers, family events, and parties. They both agreed that they would like to go back in time and live in an era where music was much more meaningful, in their view, as it would be a happier place. Though they were aware of the struggles, they believe the music was so powerful that it helped people move past those harsh realities.

The older age group had different conclusions. The words they used to describe the songs had more to do with rebellion, strength, and winning back their freedom. Their words had more of a feeling of inspiration, suggesting that this is how they felt growing up. The way they described the songs makes it seem like music was one of the ways they gained their confidence and strength to make it through those harsh years. They both admitted to the many struggles that existed in that time and agreed that those very struggles were the inspiration for much of the music. While both love listening to this music and remembering feelings of youth, neither would want to go back to that time, as they enjoy their present lives too much to change them. Though there are many issues we live through today, they would like to remain in the present.

V. Conclusion

This topic is important and relevant in today's society, as music is now more prevalent and accessible than ever. Today, people are able to access all genres of music at the touch of a button. It's as simple as taking a phone out, opening up one of numerous music streaming apps, and choosing a song. Spotify, along with other streaming sites, has changed the industry tremendously, and is possibly one of the reasons music is a top form of media content today. While some may argue that sites like these have stripped music of its value, from ease of access, others argue that it has only opened this industry up to more listeners. There are no limitations as to who can and cannot listen to music, which is an optimistic way of looking at it. Music has become a world-wide source of expression and has taken a large role in uniting our society. The ability to access and listen to music is one thing many share a common ground in, which makes music pretty special and worth learning about.

Whether through nostalgia, a construction of social identity, a decrease in stress, or a mood boost, music has many beneficial effects. With the help of music, people are able to take difficult and tragic events and either move on with life or try to take away some positive things about them. When solely looking at the societal struggles during the '60s and '70s, it may have been hard to see the world as anything but negative at the time. Instead, the people of that time chose to see life in a different way by using those events to inspire hopeful and optimistic music. It's possible that without music, many would forever be stuck in the past, and there would be no room for future growth.

References

- Aydin, C. (2017). How to forget the unforgettable? On collective trauma, cultural identity, and mnemotechnologies. *Identity*, 17(3), 125–137. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15283488.2017.1340160>
- Barrett, F. S., & Janata, P. (2016). Neural responses to nostalgia-evoking music modeled by elements of dynamic musical structure and individual differences in affective traits. *Neuropsychologia*, 91, 234–246. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neuropsychologia.2016.08.012>
- Cai, S. (2016). Contemporary Chinese TV serials: Configuring collective memory of socialist nostalgia via the Cultural Revolution. *Visual Anthropology*, 29(1), 22–35. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08949468.2016.1108821>
- Carlson, E., Saari, P., Burger, B., & Toiviainen, P. (2017). Personality and musical preference using social-tagging in excerpt-selection. *Psychomusicology: Music, Mind & Brain*, 27(3), 203–212. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pmu0000183>
-

- Dobrotvorskaja, E. (1992). Soviet teens of the 1970s: Rock generation, rock refusal, rock context. *Journal of Popular Culture*, 26(3), 145.
- Eyerman, R., Madigan, T., & Ring, M. (2017). Cultural trauma, collective memory and the Vietnam War. *Politička Misao: Croatian Political Science Review*, 54(1/2), 11–31.
- Ford, P. (2015). Other people's playlists. *New Republic*, 246(5), 4–5.
- Harsanyi, D. (2017). In the groove. *National Review*, 69(7), 48–48.
- Knopper, S. (2017, August 15). How Spotify playlists create hits. *Rolling Stone*, (1294), 17.
- Kotarha, J. A. (2002). Rock “n” roll music as a timepiece. *Symbolic Interaction*, 25(3), 397.
- Lei Chen, Shuhua Zhou, & Bryant, J. (2007). Temporal changes in mood repair through music consumption: Effects of mood, mood salience, and individual differences. *Media Psychology*, 9(3), 695–713. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15213260701283293>
- Murrock, C. J., & Higgins, P. A. (2009). The theory of music, mood and movement to improve health outcomes. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 65(10), 2249–2257. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2648.2009.05108.x>
- Nowak, R. (2016). When is a discovery? The affective dimensions of discovery in music consumption. *Popular Communication*, 14(3), 137–145. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15405702.2016.1193182>
- O'Sullivan, M.D. (2016). Informing Red Power and transforming the Second Wave: Native American women and the struggle against coerced sterilization in the 1970s. *Women's History Review*, 25(6), 965–982. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2015.1083229>
- Rentfrow, P. J., & Gosling, S. D. (2003). The Do Re Mi's of everyday life: The structure and personality correlates of music preferences. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, 84(6), 1236–1256. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.84.6.1236>
- Selbin, E. (1990). Rock 'N' Roll is here to stay...and stay and stay. *Utne Reader*, 41, 33–34.
- Shepherd, D., & Sigg, N. (2015). Music preference, social identity, and self-esteem. *Music Perception*, 32(5), 507–514. <https://doi.org/10.1525/MP.2015.32.5.507>
- Spain, D. (2011). Women's rights and gendered spaces in 1970s Boston. *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 32(1), 152–178.
- Twombly, M., & McDonald, K. (2018). A seismic year: Movements that had been building along the primary fault lines of the 1960s—the Vietnam War, the Cold War, civil rights, human rights, youth culture—exploded with force in 1968. The aftershocks registered both in America and abroad for decades afterward. *Smithsonian*, 48(9), 52–55.
- Verboord, M., & van Noord, S. (2016). The online place of popular music: Exploring the impact of geography and social media on pop artists' mainstream media attention. *Popular Communication*, 14(2), 59–72. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15405702.2015.1019073>
- Ward, S. M. (2017). Lost in translation: Social identity theory and the study of status in world politics. *International Studies Quarterly*, 61(4), 821–834. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqx042>
- Ware, L. (2013). Civil rights and the 1960s: A decade of unparalleled progress. *Maryland Law Review*, 72(4), 1087–1095.
-